

## 3. MORE NOTES ON THE INDIAN BUFFALO

*Bubalus bubalis*, the Indian wild buffalo, is one of the rarest animals in the subcontinent; and one of the most interesting. These notes made over a period of five years (1949-1953) in Bastar District of Madhya Pradesh are intended as a supplement to Mr. Prater's chapter on the wild buffalo in 'The Book of Indian Animals' and must not be construed as an independent or self-contained work.

1. The origin of the solitary bull: There is no season of the year when the mature males leave the herd and congregate together, as is the case with certain other animals, notably black buck. Nevertheless it is an undisputed fact that solitary males are often found and that these males are the biggest. They are not solitary from choice, because I have myself seen them attacked and driven off when they try to rejoin the herd. It appears that the stud bull becomes overbearing and intolerant of other males at a certain stage of his life. When this happens, the other bulls in the herd form an alliance and turn on the dictator, who is either killed or driven out of the herd. Such solitary bulls frequently attach themselves to tame herds which enter their jungles to graze, after killing the tame stud bull, or, more frequently, they mate with the tame cows whenever an opportunity occurs, without actually joining the herd. The offspring are remarkably like wild buffalo, but the number which die at, or soon after birth, is large. This appears to be due to the larger size of the calf, which causes complications in delivery. The percentage of survival increases in the second generation, as might be expected. I have seen the buffaloes of a certain village Nilji, which are almost three-quarter wild buffalo, and the owners now encourage wild bulls to mate with their cows. But this is exceptional; in most cases owners do not like wild crosses, due to the high death-rate at delivery, not only of the calf, but of the mother as well.

2. The chela bull: After watching wild buffalo closely for more than five years, I have come to the conclusion that the solitary bull is seldom really alone, particularly if he is a big one. I first heard the story of the chela from a Muria friend, and I did not believe it, until I had personally investigated four cases. It is easy to miss the chela, unless you are looking for him. He is extremely self-effacing, and acts as a sentry and general attendant for the bigger bull. Very careful stalking is necessary if the two bulls are to be seen together, and I would not recommend the pastime to novices in the art, as the chela is likely to charge without provocation, while the bigger bull escapes. I cannot explain the existence of the chela, unless it is because buffalo are naturally gregarious, and like the company of their own kind. But why another bull? And why does not the original solitary animal try to build up a herd of his own? The chela is by no means an immature youngster; in fact, he also has been outlawed from a herd, just like the guru bull. The two will only be found together when resting, or when on the way to pasturage. Then they split up, and spend the grazing hours in different places, to meet again at the lying-up site. I have known the chela to rejoin the guru when the latter was wounded; I have

also known the chela to visit the guru's pasturage as soon as the guru was dead. A chela who is guarding a wounded guru-bull is extremely dangerous and is more likely to ambush the trackers than the wounded bull himself. Fortunately such instances of devotion are not common; I have come across only one.

3. The temperament of the solitary bull: The bull buffalo has an undeserved reputation for cause-less ferocity. I have watched him at different distances for long periods at a time, I have photographed him at close range, and I have even abused him (quite unjustifiably) from a car to which he refused the right of way. The only times I have actually been charged were when he was wounded, when he had just been driven out of the herd, and when the man with me lost his nerve and bolted. I am emphatically of the view that a buffalo is not aggressive unless he is wounded, or unless his fear is aroused by any sudden movement. He will shake his head from side to side, and even paw the ground, but these are only 'show off' demonstrations, and need not be taken seriously. But if he moves towards you, even slowly, get up or behind the nearest tree; he means business; the buffalo knows only one kind of advance, the kind from which there is no retreat.

A solitary bull that acquires the habit of eating crops, is a curse to the cultivator. A charge of coarse salt fired from a muzzleloader into his rump at short range will often discourage him, if anyone can, and will, get close enough for the purpose. I did it twice, at night. The first time it was alright, the buffalo ran away. The second time, something went wrong, and it was I who ran away—at world record speed! There was no third time. The salt does no damage, and is, I think, preferable to killing or wounding an already rare animal. But nothing else will drive him away from the succulent paddy or urid, no amount of noise, or showing of lights. The damage one buffalo can do to a field, has to be seen to be believed.

4. The wounded buffalo: In his own jungles, the buffalo is frequently in fairly dense cover, with the result that only about six inches below the top of his shoulder is visible. A bullet placed there will seldom kill in the same day. The bullet must always be a solid type, of at least 300 grains. If a vital spot is not visible, do not shoot. I dislike the shooting of buffalo, and I am only referring to it because I dislike the wounding of them even more.

A wounded buffalo will invariably try to ambush his trackers. He lies on his stomach, front legs bent and hind legs under tension, facing back along his tracks. If wounded on the right, he will usually circle to his left; if wounded on his left, he will circle to his right. In either case, the method of laying the ambush is the same—he will return about fifty yards along his tracks and lie up beside them, ten or fifteen yards away from the line of tracks. The place selected is fairly open; I have never known an ambush in really dense jungle. Unless one is alert for an ambush, and sometimes even then, the first indication of the buffalo is when he is almost on you. After which it is all a matter of shooting, and luck—mostly the latter. Nothing but instantaneous death will stop a

charging buffalo. A good shot has a fifty per cent chance of survival.

If not finished off before the maggots form in the wound, the buffalo will lie all day in water deep enough to cover his wound, and only leave it to graze at night, if he is capable of grazing. His vitality is enormous, and he will cling unbelievably to a thread of life. I repeat, do not shoot buffalo; but if you do, kill cleanly and mercifully. I have had to follow far too many of other men's woundings.

5. Pasturage: A buffalo is a selective feeder, in spite of his size. He will browse through what seems to be tender grass, picking a mouthful here and a mouthful there, covering long distances in the course of his grazing. A careful examination will show that, in an apparently casual fashion, he has managed to select only the choicest bits. His grazing is done in the night and early morning or late evening, the day being spent in dense cover. It is probable that this change from the habits described by Sir Samuel Baker in the early 1890's is due to the increased disturbances to which he is subjected now-a-days. His habitat too has changed; he no longer lives in the open grassy places, and tends to frequent denser forests. A sure spot to find him in, during the latter months of the hot season, is an open maidan in the forest after it has been burnt, when the young grass begins to sprout. Five in the evening is the best time, if you want a photograph.

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#### 4. GAUR ATTACKING MAN

A Sholaga was recently killed by a gaur bull, which made an unprovoked attack on him in long grass. Nearby the remains of a cow, or young bull, which had been killed by a tiger, were found.

This appears to be yet another instance of a bull bison charging, apparently unprovoked; a tiger being in the vicinity.

In a previous note to the *Journal* I referred to three instances of unwounded bulls charging and in every case a tiger was found to be in the same area at the time. In the *Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 1, Mr. A. F. Hutton describes a case of a plantation labourer being attacked and killed by an unwounded gaur bull; here again a tiger had been around, and had badly mauled another bull nearby. It would seem as if the protracted presence of tiger has a maddening effect on bull bison; even if they are not actually mauled.

Not long ago I came on a dead bull (it had died only a few hours previously), which had obviously succumbed to blood-poisoning following an attack by a tiger. It was obvious from the broken saplings and smashed bushes in the nearby shola that the poor creature had